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**NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
Newport, R.I.**

**U.S. – Thailand: Combatant Commander Considerations for the
Asia – Pacific Rebalance**

by

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Major/USAF

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature: _____

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Paper Abstract

United States Pacific Command (US PACOM) planners recognize the treaty alliance with Thailand is a cornerstone of the United States (U.S.) engagement in the Southeast Asia region and pivotal to the Asia – Pacific rebalance. U.S. – Thai relations have stalled following a bloodless military coup which deposed a corrupt democratically elected government. In response, the U.S. levied sanctions mandated by Section 508 of Public Law 108-7 which prohibits the expenditure of appropriated funds to support any country whose duly elected head of government is deposed by military coup. This paper addresses the dangers associated with strict adherence to Section 508 mandates with the growing emergence of China as a region power in Southeast Asia. It recognizes the intangible linkage multi-national exercises hosted by US PACOM have on the development of trust and partnership building in the region. The paper draws conclusions concerning the impact to the Asia – Pacific rebalance associated with the loss of area access in Southeast Asia and recommends the Commander, US PACOM and his Legislative Affairs staff seek to update the language in Section 508 permitting continued funding of security cooperation and partnership building initiatives with Thailand.

“The Mediterranean is the ocean of the past, The Atlantic, the ocean of the present, And the Pacific, the ocean of the future.”¹

--Secretary of State John Hay (1898 – 1905)

INTRODUCTION

Following six months of political and civil unrest coupled with Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra’s removal from office by Thailand’s top court,² General Prayuth Chan-Ocha, the commander in chief of the Royal Thai Army dislodged the remnants of the Yingluck administration via military coup on May 22, 2014.³ In response to the Thai government’s deposition, the United States (U.S.) Department of State suspended \$4.7 million security-related assistance funds. Additionally, the Commander, United States Pacific Command (US PACOM) was ordered to halt participation in the bilateral naval Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training exercise and canceled military support to a planned bilateral Army security cooperation exercise.⁴

The U.S. response to Thailand’s coup is predicated upon Section 508 of Public Law 108-7 founded by the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 which centered on the containment of communism.⁵ The required diplomatic and military sanctions taken by the U.S. coupled with the strong Thai – China economic ties may be the catalyst China needs to dissolve the 60

¹ 113th Congress, Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate. "Re-balancing the Rebalance: Resourcing U.S. Diplomatic Strategy in the Asia-Pacific Region." Government Printing Office. April 17, 2014, 1. Accessed April 30, 2015. <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CPRT-113SPRT87269/pdf/CPRT-113SPRT87269.pdf>.

² Tim Hume, "Ousted Thai PM Yingluck to Face Impeachment over Rice Program." CNN. May 8, 2014. Accessed March 23, 2015. <http://www.cnn.com/2014/05/08/world/asia/thailand-yingluck-dismissed-reaction/>.

³ Eline Gordts, "Meet General Prayuth Chan-Ocha, The Man Behind Thailand's Coup." The Huffington Post. May 23, 2014. Accessed March 23, 2015. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/23/prayuth-chan-ocha-thailand-coup_n_5378317.html.

⁴ Scot Marciel, "State's Marciel at House Hearing on Thailand." IIP Digital | U.S. Department of State. June 24, 2014. Accessed March 13, 2015.

<http://translations.state.gov/st/english/texttrans/2014/06/20140624302580.html#axzz3EVz7uzal>.

⁵ Ibid.

year U.S. – Thai treaty ally cooperation.⁶ As the recognized regional leader, Thailand is the linchpin for stability in Southeast Asia and critical to the U.S. strategic rebalance to Asia-Pacific.⁷ The Commander, US PACOM and his Legislative Affairs staff must seek revision of the antiquated U.S. law to prevent Chinese exploitation of the void caused by the mandated U.S. sanctions.

BACKGROUND

Thailand is America's oldest Southeast Asia regional partner.⁸ As one of five designated major non-NATO allies in Asia – Pacific, Thailand is granted greater access to U.S. military assistance, advanced weaponry, and foreign aid funds in comparison to other regional countries.⁹ A political and economic regional player, Thailand is pivotal to the Obama administration's Asia – Pacific rebalance.¹⁰ In response to Thailand's 2006 military coup, the Bush administration froze \$24 million in military aid.¹¹ However, U.S. military support of security cooperation initiatives were not withdrawn. Thailand hosted its annual multilateral joint exercise Cobra Gold with the assistance of the Commander, US PACOM, his planning staff, and U.S. military support.¹² Additionally, Thailand was allowed to retain

⁶ Emma Chanlett-Avery and Ben Dolven, "Thailand: Background and U.S. Relations." *Congressional Research Service*, 2014, 22, 1. Accessed March 13, 2015. <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL32593.pdf>.

⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁸ Gregory Poling, "Washington's Thai PR Problem." Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. March 3, 2015. Accessed March 13, 2015. <http://amti.csis.org/washingtons-thai-pr-problem/>.

⁹ Ibid., 7.

¹⁰ Poling, "Washington's Thai PR Problem."

¹¹ Max Fisher, "U.S. Has Spotty Record on Law Requiring It to Cut Aid after Coups." Washington Post. July 5, 2013. Accessed March 23, 2015. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2013/07/05/u-s-has-spotty-record-on-law-requiring-it-to-cut-aid-after-coups/>.

¹² Mark Fayloga, "Pacific Partners Come Together for Cobra Gold 2007." U.S. Marine Corps Forces, Pacific. May 8, 2007. Accessed April 30, 2015. <http://www.marforpac.marines.mil/News/NewsArticleDisplay/tabid/919/Article/4710/pacific-partners-come-together-for-cobra-gold-2007.aspx>.

its designation as a major non-NATO ally status.¹³ The actions, taken by the Bush administration in 2006, were in adherence to Section 508 of Public Law 108-7 dated February 20, 2003 which states, “None of the funds appropriated or otherwise made available pursuant to this Act shall be obligated or expended to finance directly any assistance to the government of any country whose duly elected head of government is deposed by decree or military coup....”¹⁴ Thailand’s democratically elected government and strong U.S. – Thai military-to-military relations eventually restored security assistance funding to pre-2006 military coup levels.¹⁵

ANALYSIS

Policy/Strategy Alignment

A key tenet of operational leadership is understanding the relationship between policy and strategy.¹⁶ US PACOM’s desired end state of a secure and prosperous Asia – Pacific attained through strengthening alliances and partnerships¹⁷ demonstrates the Commander, US PACOM understands policy/strategy linkage. US PACOM’s desired end state directly aligns with one of the U.S. Department of Defense’s (DoD) top issues, the Asia – Pacific rebalance.

¹⁸ As part of the Asia – Pacific rebalance, US PACOM planners recognize the treaty alliance with Thailand is a cornerstone of the U.S. engagement in the Southeast Asia region.¹⁹ US

¹³ Jessica Schulberg, "The Military Coup in Thailand Is Putting the U.S. in an Awkward Position." New Republic. May 23, 2014. Accessed March 13, 2015. <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/117894/thailand-coup-foreign-assistance-act-put-us-awkward-position>.

¹⁴ 108th Congress, "Consolidated Appropriations Resolution, 2003." *Public Law 108-7 108th Congress*, 2003, 544. Accessed March 13, 2015. <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-108publ7/pdf/PLAW-108publ7.pdf>.

¹⁵ Chanlett-Avery and Dolven, "Thailand", 6.

¹⁶ Milan N. Vego, "Operational Leadership." In *Joint Operational Warfare: Theory and Practice*, X-48. 1st ed. (Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, 2009).

¹⁷ Samuel J. Locklear III, "US PACOM Strategy." U.S. Pacific Command. Accessed April 30, 2015. <http://www.pacom.mil/AboutUSPACOM/USPACOMStrategy.aspx>.

¹⁸ Ash Carter, "Asia-Pacific Rebalance." U.S. Department of Defense. Accessed April 30, 15. http://www.defense.gov/home/features/2015/0415_asia-pacific-rebalance/.

¹⁹ Locklear, "US PACOM Strategy."

PACOM planners seek to strengthen the Thai alliance by enhancing the ability to train and operate together. Furthermore, the Commander, US PACOM recognizes a multilateral approach toward security cooperation within Southeast Asia enhances interoperability with regional allies, such as Thailand, builds trust, and prevents misperceptions that can lead to conflict.²⁰

US PACOM and DoD policy/strategy alignment synchronizes with President Obama's vision of advancing the rebalance to Asia and the Pacific outlined in his 2015 National Security Strategy (NSS). The NSS calls for deepening partnership in Southeast Asia and upholding our treaty obligations to Thailand.²¹ Moreover, the President's 2016 budget proposal seeking an increase to Southeast Asia regional assets further signals U.S. continued commitment to Thailand.²² Therefore, one can ascertain the Global Combatant Commander's, DoD's and NSS's Asia – Pacific rebalance symmetry reinforces the standing U.S. – Thai defense alliance articulated by the 2012 Joint Vision statement.

The current U.S. – Thai defense alliance is codified in the 2012 Joint Vision statement endorsed by then U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta and Minister of Defence [sic] Air Chief Marshal Sukumpol Suwanatat. The joint vision acknowledges the importance of a mutual defense alliance. Additionally, the vision statement focuses on four key areas: Southeast Asia regional security partnership, Asia – Pacific region stability support, bilateral and multilateral interoperability, and relations building, coordination, and collaboration

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Barack Obama, "National Security Strategy." The WHITE HOUSE President Barack Obama. 24. February 2015. Accessed April 30, 2015.

https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy.pdf.

²² Poling, "Washington's Thai PR Problem."

across the spectrum of defense.²³ The joint vision declaration coupled with President Obama's 2012 visit to Southeast Asia, exemplifies the importance Thailand plays as a regional leader and the critical role Southeast Asia plays in the U.S. rebalance to Asia – Pacific strategy.²⁴

The joint U.S. – Thai affirmation reinvigorated military ties weakened by the 2006 coup sanctions enacted by the Bush administration while showing U.S. resolve toward Southeast Asia and recognizing Thailand as a regional leader.²⁵ As stated by General Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, during his visit to Thailand in 2012, “Thailand’s people have used their growing economic and military strength to expand beyond their borders as a contributor to global security efforts.”²⁶ The revitalized U.S. – Thai military relationship comes at a time when China’s economic influence in Southeast Asia is at an all-time high.²⁷ The U.S. – Thai joint vision declaration serves as a hedging opportunity for Thailand given the close economic ties shared with China.²⁸

Economic Interdependency

Thailand recognizes its economic interdependency with China and the need to minimize risk associated with being closely linked economically to any one nation.²⁹ However, Thailand continues to seek investment opportunities with China by developing

²³ Leon Panetta and Suwanatat Sukumpol, "2012 Joint Vision Statement for the Thai-U.S. Defense Alliance." United States Department of Defense. November 15, 2012. Accessed March 23, 2015. <http://www.defense.gov/releases/release.aspx?releaseid=15685>.

²⁴ Sheldon Simon, "US-Southeast Asia Relations: High-Level Attention." *Comparative Connections A Triannual E-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations*, 2013, 1. Accessed March 13, 2015. http://csis.org/files/publication/1203qus_seasia.pdf.

²⁵ Simon, "US-Southeast Asia", 2.

²⁶ Karen Parrish, "Dempsey: U.S.-Thailand Partnership Holds Growth Potential." United States Department of Defense. June 5, 2012. Accessed March 23, 2015. <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=116620>.

²⁷ Chanlett-Avery and Dolven, "Thailand", 11.

²⁸ Simon, "US-Southeast Asia", 6.

²⁹ Bradley Mathews, "Bangkok's Fine Balance: Thailand's China Debate." Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies. December 1, 2003, 7. Accessed March 18, 2015. http://www.apcss.org/Publications/SAS/ChinaDebate/ChinaDebate_Mathews.pdf.

technology, environmental protection, and strategic cooperation agreements.³⁰ China is Thailand's lead export trading partner and second import trading partner. China's bilateral trade with the Association of Southeast Asia Nation (ASEAN) rose from \$54.8 billion in 2002 to \$443.6 billion in 2013 solidifying China's position as a global economic leader amongst ASEAN partners.³¹ China continues to seek investment opportunities to enhance its influence in the Southeast Asia region.

The Kra Isthmus canal in Thailand is one such investment initiative. Viewing the canal project as fiscally viable, China commissioned its state-owned construction company and a private consortium to explore the feasibility of building a 100 km artificial canal linking the South China Sea and Indian Ocean. This undertaking promises to shorten transoceanic shipments by 1,000 km and will benefit not only China and ASEAN, but Japan and other global trade partners too.³² The Kra Isthmus canal economic investment, valued at \$10 billion³³ coupled with the contentious U.S. – Thai political climate created by the recent military coup may be the catalyst China needs to solidify an enduring China – Thai partnership.

The strong U.S. rhetoric demanding Thailand's new military junta installs a democratically elected leader and reinforced by the U.S. suspension of security-related assistance funds is driving a wedge between the two countries.³⁴ China has sought to exploit the developing U.S. – Thai fracture by filling the emerging U.S. military void. In June 2014, less than a month after the military coup, China's Army Deputy Chief of Staff extended an

³⁰ Chanlett-Avery and Dolven, "Thailand", 11.

³¹ Ibid., 12.

³² Chankaiyee, "China to Bypass Malacca Strait by Kra Isthmus Canal in Thailand." China Daily Mail. March 16, 2014. Accessed March 18, 2015. <http://chinadailymail.com/2014/03/16/china-to-bypass-malacca-strait-by-kra-isthmus-canal-in-thailand/>.

³³ Global Security, "Thailand Kra Canal." Global Security.org. Accessed March 18, 2015. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/thailand/kra-canal.htm>.

³⁴ Marciel, "State's Marciel".

invitation and hosted a Thai military delegation visit to China in an effort to formalize increased military training and to exchange views on regional security.³⁵ China welcomes closer military relations with Thailand, formally acknowledging the military junta led government and pledging to remain neutral with what China regards as an internal domestic issue.³⁶ Furthermore, China expressed support for the military junta regime stating, “Western-style democracy had led Thailand astray.”³⁷

Partnership and Trust

Recognizing the invaluable training and partnership building Exercise Cobra Gold 2015 affords regional partners, the Commander, US PACOM secured authorization allowing U.S. military participation. However, U.S. military involvement was significantly scaled back and focused on noncombat training such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief preparedness training.³⁸ Uncertainty surrounding the Thai democratic election delays resulted in U.S. policy makers withdrawing authorization for a US PACOM planner to participate in the Cobra Gold 2016 initial planning conference.³⁹

As the former Chief, Naval Operations (CNO) Admiral Roughead stated, “All too often we focus on the exercise proper, when the ships get together at sea....But these exercises are really months in the planning and the activities that take place between the

³⁵ Tom Peters, "Thai Junta Holds Talks with Chinese Military, Investors." World Socialist Web Site. June 13, 2014. Accessed March 13, 2015. <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2014/06/13/thai-j13.html>.

³⁶ Patrick Jory, "China Is a Big Winner from Thailand's Coup." East Asia Forum. June 18, 2014. Accessed March 23, 2015. <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/06/18/china-is-a-big-winner-from-thailands-coup/>.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Poling, "Washington's Thai PR Problem."

³⁹ Joshua Simonidis, "Japan's Balancing Act in Thailand." Center for Strategic & International Studies|cogitASIA CSIS Asia Program Policy Blog. May 6, 2015. Accessed May 7, 2015. <http://cogitasia.com/japans-balancing-act-in-thailand/>.

planners...really begin to develop relationships that are lasting....”⁴⁰ Multinational exercise operational planning is the catalyst which forges relationship and builds trust amongst partner nations. The bonds established by the nucleus of partner nation operational planners enables assimilation of the core tenets of U.S. military to Host Nation military exercises: U.S. presence, U.S. commitment to security and prosperity of the region, and political relationship maturation with military/security underpinning.⁴¹

“I think that the exercises can go a long way to managing tensions.”⁴² stated by former CNO Roughead is especially true with regards to Thailand. A multinational exercise like Cobra Gold is planned a year or two years in advance and places significant fiscal demands on regional participant. Predictability is critical to success.⁴³ The threat of last minute cancelations such as those levied by the U.S. with regard to participation in Cobra Gold 2015 exacerbated the politically sensitive situation and undermined the trust developed amongst operational planners.⁴⁴ Therefore, synchronization of diplomatic and military lines of effort are critical to prevention military encroachment by China.

Participating as an observer-plus (participant in the humanitarian and civil assistance training only) nation during exercise Cobra Gold 2014, China looks to leverage the experience by fostering renewed military ties between the two countries.⁴⁵ China cited misconstrued testimony provided by Mr. Scot Marciel, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs insinuating the U.S. planned to block Thailand’s

⁴⁰ Mira Rapp Hooper and Gary Roughead. "The Evolving Role of Military Exercises in Asia | Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative." Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. March 4, 2015. Accessed March 13, 2015. <http://amti.csis.org/the-evolving-role-of-military-exercises-in-asia/>.

⁴¹ Hooper and Roughead, "The Evolving Role of Military Exercises."

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Poling, "Washington's Thai PR Problem."

⁴⁵ Nicole Yeo, "China's Participation in Cobra Gold 2014: A Golden Opportunity for the United States?" China US Focus. March 11, 2014. Accessed April 30, 2015. <http://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/chinas-participation-in-cobra-gold-2014-a-golden-opportunity-for-the-united-states/>.

participation/hosting of Cobra Gold 2015.⁴⁶ When in fact, Mr. Marciel’s testimony before the House Committee of Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific merely stressed continued review of other programs and engagements for consideration if further Section 508 measures were deemed necessary.⁴⁷

Misconceptions like the one noted above and the rigid adherence to funding suspension requirements mandated by Section 508 of Public Law 108-7 undermines the essence of the U.S. rebalance to Asia – Pacific. Former Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel stated, “economic ties and people-to-people contact with nations like Thailand provide the necessary stability for Pacific nations to focus on giving their people a more inclusive, peaceful and prosperous future.”⁴⁸ The U.S. rebalance to Asia-Pacific strategy hinges on the strategic message clearly articulating a strong U.S. commitment. Pacific partners must fully understand the U.S. is “in it for the long haul.”⁴⁹

Past Precedence

The intent of the strategic rebalance can be attained if one applies past precedence enacted through legislation which affords deviations to Section 508 of Public Law 108-7. The Clinton administration was faced with a similar challenge following the 1999 military coup in Pakistan. Concerned with the prospects of nuclear proliferation in the aftermath of Section 508 mandates, President Clinton’s administration under advisement from the Commander, U.S. Central Command (US CENTCOM) and his interagency staff, opted to implement only some of the provision required under Section 508. Furthermore, the Clinton administration staff knew congressional legislation had been authored and would be

⁴⁶ Jory, “China Is a Big Winner”.

⁴⁷ Marciel, “State’s Marciel”.

⁴⁸ 113th Congress, “Re-balancing”, 8.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 8.

incorporated into the FY2000 Defense Appropriations Act, Title IX affording the President authority to waive Section 508 mandated prohibitions. President Clinton exercised his Title IX authority providing aid to Pakistan.⁵⁰ Likewise, in the aftermath of 9/11, the Bush administration sought and received special provisions from Congress granting President George W. Bush the authority to bypass Section 508 in its entirety. Subsequently, under advisement from the Commander, US CENTCOM, President Bush fully restored security-related assistance to Pakistan. Additionally, he restored assistance to Algeria which had been sanctioned by the U.S. under Section 508 for nearly ten years.⁵¹

Following the 2006 Thai military coup, the Bush administration implemented some Section 508 measures, freezing some portions of the military assistance funding to Thailand. The Bush administration permitted continuation of humanitarian and economic aid.⁵² Additionally, through Commander, US PACOM advisement and interagency advocacy, the U.S. military was authorized to assist with planning, participate in and provided support to Thailand's military hosted exercise Cobra Gold 2007.⁵³ One may deduce that past precedence established by the Clinton and Bush administrations should enable the Commander, US PACOM and his Legislative Affairs staff to affect updating of the obsolete language forbidding U.S. governmental support to countries whose democratic government has been overthrown by a military coup delineated in Section 508. Revamping the law to permit security cooperation and partnership building enables the US PACOM planning staff

⁵⁰ Colin Cookman and Bill French, "The Pakistan Aid Dilemma: Historical Efforts at Conditionality and Current Disputes Converge in the U.S. Congress." *Center for American Progress*, 2011, 5. Accessed April 30, 2015. http://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2011/12/pdf/pakistan_aid.pdf.

⁵¹ Fisher, "U.S. Has Spotty Record".

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Fayloga, "Pacific Partners".

to attain the Commander, US PACOM's desired end state while fulfilling the President's vision denoted in the 2015 National Security Strategy.

Given the current climate in Southeast Asia, authoring changes to Public Law 108-7 for Thailand by the Obama administration is prudent. The restrictions currently imposed under Section 508 are creating a divide between the U.S. and Thailand. If allowed to manifest, China will exploit the seam created by the required actions of Section 508 and negate 60 years of mutual cooperation shared by the U.S. and Thailand.⁵⁴ More importantly are the ramifications the rigid policy adherence could have on the U.S. rebalance to Asia – Pacific. A critical facet of the rebalance strategy is developing and fostering new relations. However, one must remember the equal importance of nurturing and maintaining relations with established regional partner nations.

Vietnam Alternative

One may argue the access afforded to Southeast Asia through partnership with Thailand should not be at the expense of the U.S. belief of consenting governance. Consent of the governed is the essence of the American spirit. It is codified in the U.S. Declaration of Independence, permeates American culture, and defines how Americans view the world.⁵⁵ Therefore, the U.S. should uphold the requirements delineated in Section 508 which encourages the return of a democratically elected Thai government. The loss of access to Southeast Asia created by the Thailand's military coup can be mitigated though warming U.S. – Vietnam relations.

⁵⁴ Chanlett-Avery and Dolven, "Thailand", 1.

⁵⁵ Terry Jordan, "The Declaration of Independence." In *The U.S. Constitution and Fascinating Facts About It*, 59. 7th ed. (Naperville, IL: Oak Hill Pub., 1999).

U.S. – Vietnam relations have improved across the spectrum of the U.S. instruments of power since the normalization of U.S. – Vietnam diplomatic ties in 1995.⁵⁶ Vietnam is viewed as a promising Asia Pacific partner given the shared geopolitical, security, and economic interests. Coupled with 2,000 miles of coastline facing the South China Sea, relations with Vietnam are integral to the U.S. rebalance to Asia – Pacific. Therefore, US PACOM planners seek to foster partnership building enabling U.S. influence and staying power in the region. US PACOM planners view theater security cooperation with Vietnam as crucial to gaining and shaping U.S. interests in Southeast Asia.⁵⁷

A key initiative taken to advance security ties is expanded U.S. – Vietnam naval engagement exercises. US PACOM naval planners will seek further opportunities to expand bilateral training in humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and search and rescue exercises with Vietnam.⁵⁸ Additionally, Vietnamese military personnel are being afforded education and training opportunities at U.S. military educational institutions. The Naval War College welcomed two Vietnamese officers to their Naval Staff College 2015 program. Furthermore, Vietnam has vowed to allow more port visits for U.S. military ships to Cam Ranh Bay. These initiatives are integral to the development of mutual trust and future interoperability between the U.S. and Vietnam.⁵⁹

The warming relations with Vietnam and proximity to the South China Sea could eventually negate U.S. access requirements to Thailand. However, Vietnam's desire to build trade and economic cooperation between the two nations first may prevent military access for

⁵⁶ H. Murray, P. Nguyen, and G. Poling, "A New Era in U.S. – Vietnam Relations: Deepening Ties Two Decades after Normalization." A Report of the CSIS Sumitro Chair for Southeast Asia Studies. June 2014. Accessed March 13, 2015. http://csis.org/files/publication/140609_Hiebert_USVietnamRelations_Web.pdf.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

the foreseeable future. Vietnam's leadership insists military-to-military cooperation should not be the focus of the bilateral relationship. Fostering partnership and mutual trust is key to continue relationship development and could take as much as ten years to mature.⁶⁰

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Commander, US PACOM and his Legislative Affairs staff must secure policy maker support to enact legislation aimed at changing Section 508 of Public Law 108-7 requirements permitting the dispersal of security-related assistance funds and continued military participation in security cooperation initiative to achieve the U.S. rebalance to Asia – Pacific. The Pakistan exemption authorized by Congress in 2003⁶¹ and the Algerian military aid reinstated by the Bush administration in the aftermath of 9/11 establishes precedence.⁶² U.S. support of and participation in exercise Cobra Gold 2007 prior to the installment of a democratically elected Thai government exemplifies the importance of such an action.⁶³

Another alternative is for the Commander, US PACOM and his Legislative Affairs staff to leverage support from policy makers in the procurement of a long-term exemption to Section 508 of Public Law 108-7 as needed to facilitate funding specifically earmarked for only Thailand. Past precedence supports such an action. A long-term exemption would enable Cobra Gold 2016 joint planning between Thai and US PACOM planners.⁶⁴ Furthermore, the action would show U.S. resolve and commitment to Thailand as well as Southeast Asia regional partners.

Lastly, the Commander, US PACOM could consider maintaining the status quo. Garnering the support of policy makers through his Legislative Affairs staff, the Commander

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Cookman and French, "The Pakistan Aid Dilemma", 5.

⁶² Fisher, "U.S. Has Spotty Record".

⁶³ Fayloga, "Pacific Partners".

⁶⁴ Hooper and Roughead. "The Evolving Role of Military Exercises."

US PACOM can selectively secure authorization facilitating U.S. – Thai engagements. Maintenance of the status quo sends a clear message to the Thai military junta and may expedite the restoration of a democratically elected central government. However, given the Thai – Chinese economic interdependency⁶⁵ coupled with China’s desire to establish herself as a regional military power,⁶⁶ selective engagements could be misinterpreted allowing China to exploit the fractured seams of the U.S. – Thai military relations as the U.S. rebalances to Asia – Pacific.

CONCLUSION

Given the economic inter-dependence between Thailand and China, maintaining a strong U.S. – Thai bilateral defense partnership is crucial. The U.S. law mandating economic assistance suspension to Thailand following their military coup must be revised as it puts the U.S. rebalance to Asia – Pacific at risk in the Southeast Asia region. As China continues to strengthen its position as the economic foundation in Southeast Asia, assuring regional partners of the U.S. military commitment to the Pacific is paramount. A recognized regional leader, Thailand is the linchpin for stability in Southeast Asia and critical to the Commander, US PACOM’s rebalance to Asia-Pacific efforts.

Showing U.S. resolve as Thailand works through its political challenges preserves the 60 years of established mutual partnership.⁶⁷ In a region where China’s growing economic influence continues to flourish,⁶⁸ the continuance of military fiscal aid and U.S. – Thai support of security cooperation exercises like Cobra Gold builds trust and strengthens strategic partnership, the keystone of the U.S. forces rebalance to the Pacific. The

⁶⁵ Bradley Mathews, "Bangkok's Fine Balance: Thailand's China Debate."

⁶⁶ Nicole Yeo, "China's Participation in Cobra Gold 2014: A Golden Opportunity for the United States?"

⁶⁷ Chanlett-Avery and Dolven, "Thailand", 1.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 11.

Commander, US PACOM and his Legislative Affairs staff must seek to update the language in Section 508 of Public Law 108-7 to solidify U.S. resolve and promote stronger U.S. – Thai military relations. Updating Section 508 or seeking a long-term exemption to the law would afford flexible application of security assistance resources. Regional security assistance is the catalyst for the U.S. pivot to the Pacific and fosters stability in response to China’s emerging influence in the South Pacific. As Secretary of State John Hay declared in 1900, “...the Pacific is the ocean of the future.”⁶⁹ His foresight still echoes true, especially in today’s continuously changing and volatile environment.

⁶⁹ 113th Congress, “Re-balancing”, 1.

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